

Jean Baudrillard and a Counter-Mannerist Art of Latent Excess

by Joseph Nechvatal

published at

International Journal of Baudrillard Studies

Volume 3, Number 2 (July 2006)

ISSN: 1705-6411

<https://baudrillardstudies.ubishops.ca/jean-baudrillard-and-a-counter-mannerist-art-of-latent-excess/>

“Something lies hidden behind the orgy of images.”

-Baudrillard, *Aesthetic Illusion and Disillusion*

“Reversibility, challenge, and seduction are indestructible.”

-Baudrillard, *The Matrix Revisited*



Joseph Nechvatal's Second Life avatar standing on the head of the Jean Baudrillard avatar

Criticism is only possible with distance, but Jean Baudrillard proclaims that there is no possibility of distance anymore in techno-mediocratic society. (Baudrillard, *Simulations*) In this paper I explore this by now popular proclamation in terms of art and propose its refutation through what I will call *an art of latent excess*. This art of latent excess will be demonstrated primarily with the art found in the Abside (Apse) of the Grotte de Lascaux. I shall therefore theorise issues of ancient art and its relationship to covert excess in the Baudrillardian context of a world culture where information now controls the flow and speed of consciousness.

To summarise, the Baudrillardian position is that we live inside an increasingly global simulation where the dominance of media-forms engender, homogenise, hallucinate and drive communications via a rigidly methodical interactive network: what Baudrillard calls the *hyper-reality of simulation*. Observations concerning the sense of dissolving borders that once helped to separate the "true" from the "false" and the "real" from the "imaginary" were distinctly established in Jean Baudrillard's book *The Ecstasy of Communication*. In it (and in other books) Baudrillard theorised the media's effect on society in our environment and argued that we had entered a post-modern era because, as he saw it, it is the production of images and information, and not the production of material goods, that determined who held power. In the post-modern mediascape, according to Baudrillard, the private sphere of human intimacy is exteriorised and made categorical and thus diaphanous. In *The Ecstasy of Communication* Baudrillard described this diaphanous media effect as an instrument of *obscenity, transparency and ecstasy*.

Artists and art critics influenced by Baudrillard, and I include myself here somewhat, tended to elucidate a concern with images in the circulation system and were occupied with their recoding and perverse reuse, now recycled into a commentarial neo-conceptual art. Thus the Baudrillardian post-modern/neo-conceptual artist worked with cultural givens, trying to manipulate them in various ways, such as through pastiche, collage, and/or jarring juxtapositions. One ideal aim of the Baudrillardian artist was to

appropriate (select and manipulate) circulating media signs in such a way as to elude being utterly dominated by them - even while Baudrillard was claiming that in art there were “no more criteria of judgment”. (Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, p. 14)

Concerning contemporary art, in his infamous essay from 1996 *The Conspiracy of Art* Baudrillard maintains, “that there is no longer any possible critical judgment” pertaining to art, only a “genial sharing of nullity” (Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, p. 28), even while admitting that art is not central to his concerns. That indeed he doesn’t “really identify with it” (while mourning its “loss of transcendence” (Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, p. 65)). But even though he has stated that art is not his problem, he has gone ahead and invented a concept to address this supposed state of non-judgmental affairs in art: *tranaesthetics*. (Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, p. 103)

Baudrillard's *ecstasy of communication theory* anticipated this position towards art as it described post-modern society of the 1970s and 1980s in terms of the presupposition that social immersion in media simulation (what he called *cyberblitz*) adds up to a new zone of experience. Baudrillard started rethinking media consumer theory in the light of what he saw as the excesses of the technological information society. Baudrillard's previous works had emphasised the shaping of the consumer society and how it provided a new world of significance and value. In so doing he addressed issues of Marxism and the general political economy. However, with his book *The Mirror of Production* Baudrillard broke with Marxism and moved away from his previous critique of the political economy towards a more systematic development of a theory of *simulation*; a radical semiurgy based on what he saw as the persistent uninterrupted proliferation and dissemination of signs. Thereafter he addressed media simulacra and the new information technologies which produced what Baudrillard called both *implosion* and the previously recapped *hyper-reality*. These hyper-real implosive circumstances developed for Baudrillard into what constitutes a new post-modern world which, in Baudrillard's theorising, obliterated the boundaries, categories and values of the previous non-hyper-real forms of industrial society while establishing new forms of social organisation and new forms of experiences. He viewed virtual reality as a simple extenuation and perfection of this implosive hyper-reality while

claiming that “the image can no longer imagine the real because it is the real” and that “images are virtual reality”. (Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, p. 120) Which is not at all the case, if one knows what virtual reality actually is (i.e., *immersion* in the image-sound).

We are, Baudrillard claimed, in a new hyper-real era in which the new technologies of media, cybernetic models, virtual systems, computer networks, and information processing supplant industrial production and the political economy as the organising synthesis/principle of society. Such a self-producing, self-regulating and self-referencing principle of total-hyper-reality (and its feeling of closure) was the essence of Baudrillard's philosophical propositions; propositions which I see in over totalising terms – and thus remain somewhat indifferent to them. Indeed, for me, Baudrillard's philosophy seems to proclaim an almost romantic gesamt resolution which is all-embracing in its use of the philosophical notion of a cyberblitz *zeitgeist* which envelopes (supposedly) all aspects of our lives. I will demonstrate below how this can be refuted through a counter-mannerist art of latent excess.

Baudrillard submits, among other things, that the intrinsic objective of simulacra is to bring forward a malleable (but controllable) universal *modus operandi* bent on world domination through electronic media totalisation (the feedback-looped totality of computer terminals and television screens). For Baudrillard the computer and television screen are both depthless and infinite, a superficial abyss and a hypnotic transparency which simulates and denies space at the same time. As he wrote in *Simulations*, the screen offers "an aesthetics of the hyper-real, a thrill of vertiginous and phoney exactitude, a thrill of alienation and magnification, of distortion in scale, of excessive transparency...". (Baudrillard, *Simulations*, p. 50)

Of course, for Baudrillard the simulacra-screen-world (which he calls the perfect crime) is never perfect and the artist is the one who leaves traces of imperfection. (Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, p. 1) So when Baudrillard described the hyper-real condition as a transformation in which the code of production becomes the primary social determinant, he makes an important provocative point for art as he focused artist's concentration on

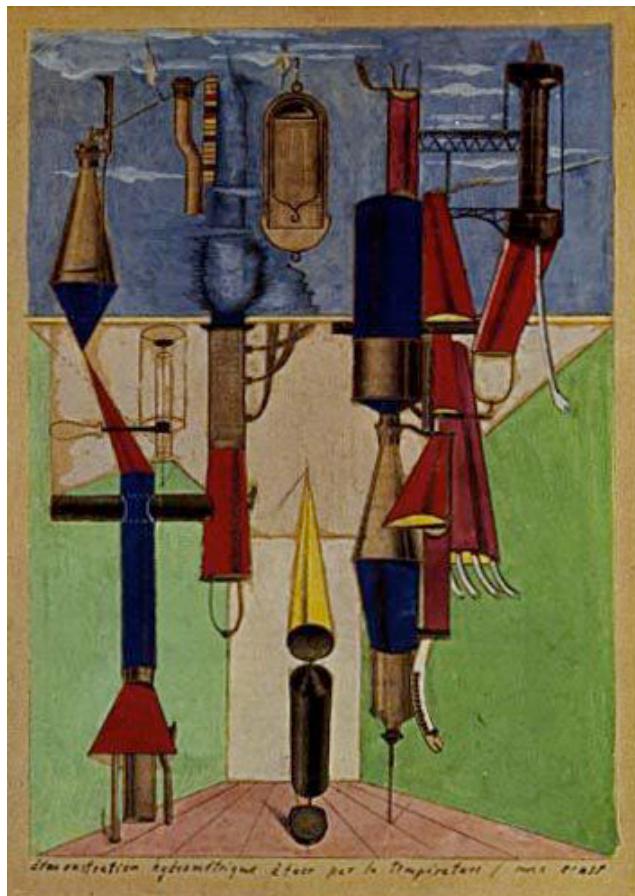
media, simulation, new technologies, and cybernetics. Among Baudrillard's most provocative assertions for art are his reflections on the role of the media in forming the post-modern world and our place within it. Baudrillard therefore puts forth a paradigmatic model of the media as an *all-over, engulfing, omni-present, totalising agent*. He theorises that such a process leads to both a collapse of meaning and the destruction of distinctions between media and reality. In a society presumably saturated with media messages; information and meaning *implode* into pure effect without content or meaning.

This, if solely true, would set the conditions for the production of exclusively, in his terms, “null” (worthless) art. Happily it is only slightly true, as sweeping generalizations of what contemporary artist do and mean don't hold - they vary greatly. There is a gradational scale here of which Baudrillard either is unaware or ignores. At the root of Baudrillard's generalizations lay his overly respectful estimation of the work of Andy Warhol (1928-1987), who he claims “freed us from aesthetics and art...”. (Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, p. 44)

Obviously in some cases he is correct, that contemporary art has become “null” through derivative repetition - most notably with the reception of kitsch into the serious art world best exemplified by the work of Jeff Koons, of whom Baudrillard writes that it is “impossible to know whether he is stupid or not, whether he can distinguish the kitsch from the original, the true from the false” (implying that there is such a thing as a true original – if he was not being merely ironic here). It is impossible to tell. (Baudrillard, *Cool Memories IV*, p. 92)

But such hyperbole serves him poorly when he generalizes nullity as a general state of affairs in contemporary art. There is a worthwhile - even critical - possibility to art (both ancient and contemporary) which I will demonstrate in this paper. Such a hyperbolical error is understandable however because Baudrillard himself tends to use a model of the media as a black-hole that absorbs all information contents into a situation which no longer communicates purposeful messages. As content implodes into appearance, presumably the medium and the real are now seen in an indistinct *totalised pattern*, from

which there is *no critical distance* from which to oppose (or even surmise one would think) it. Dada-Surrealist techniques of uncertainty, irony, mockery and humour, all of which downplay grandiloquent reason - and particularly Max Ernst's (1891-1976) Dada concept of "systematic displacement"; a technique which is concerned with the liberation of individual signs from their utilitarian purpose - are discounted as prototypes here; which is not as one might have hoped and expected after reading Baudrillard in *The Transparency of Evil* say that "...so long as there is a dysfunction in a system, a departure from known laws governing its operation, there is always the prospect of transcending the problem." (Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, p. 32)



Max Ernst, *Hydrometric Demonstration of Killing by Temperature*, 1920



Max Ernst, *Sambesiland*, 1921, photographic enlargement of photomontage with ink mounted on paperboard, 6 13/16 x 9 1/8".

Indeed in asserting the ascendancy of Andy Warhol's work over that of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) and the Dadaists (Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, pp. 76-77) Baudrillard misses the authentic, original (first-generation) Dada-Surrealist impulse of opposition to unmitigated representation. For example, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), in his essay on the Surrealists, notes how their emphasis on excess and ecstatic encounters creates an opposition to the domain of purpose through an ecstatic excess which dissolves away the idea of the self as determined by controlling utilitarian purpose. (Benjamin, *Reflections*, p. 161) This is all-important to Benjamin for, writing in 1929, the aspect of the Surrealist movement which he saw as embodying its principal worth, was Surrealism's place in the political awareness and the struggle of socialist resistance against the rising threat of the irrational ideology of fascism. The dialectical step beyond intoxication (which is reached first by entering into it) (Benjamin, *Reflections*, p.138) is the beginning of a new realm of purposes, now directed toward the revolutionary transformation of an irrational social reality which insists on calling itself rational.

By ignoring such basic Dadaist dysfunctional strategies (by over-valuing Warhol's own appropriation of them via Duchamp), Baudrillard is able to claim rather that the masses can only incorporate media content, thereby neutralising meaning by demanding and obtaining more and more irrational self-contradictory spectacle/entertainment, thus further eroding the boundary between the media and the *real*. All modes of representation collapse into a realm neither real nor imaginary, but *simulatory*.

Perhaps for the masses this is an accurate analysis (and a stopping point), but for an artist interested in excess this is where things only start to become active. By ignoring the potential impact of the Dada-Surrealist metaphoric procedures of juxtaposition and overlapping which pertain to the liberation of the meaning of signs, Baudrillard, in my view, misses the precision with which they remove from the image-world the closed familiarity of his *absolute* and leave information suspended in a plenum (vacuum state) of consciousness. The *Les Transparence* series of transparency paintings from the late 1920s of Dada painter Francis Picabia (1879-1953) - with their extensive use of simultaneity - are a good example of this visual vacuum state; and an important precedent to a contemporary décadent art of latent excess. When visual information is frustratingly suspended, there is only the slightest difference between an intentional and an involuntary transcendence of reality. Such a collapse of utilitarian consciousness (combined with the pursuit of inexactitude) may create the effect of a unique post-representational excess in our mental-perceptual circuitry.



Francis Picabia. *Hera*. c. 1929. Oil on cardboard. 105 x 75 cm.

As we have seen, for Baudrillard, media, information and communications neutralise signification by encompassing spectators in a glossy media-immersion, which he defines in terms of an inert absorption of images which resist meaning, rather than an active processing/production of significance. This, I wish to point out again, is quite a totalising generalisation. In making such a sweeping statement, Baudrillard reversed the propositions found in Marshall McLuhan's books *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, and *The Medium is the Message*; all of which perceived media as extensions and exteriorisations of our human powers even while questioning the relationship between medium and content. By contrast, Baudrillard argued that *humanity is immersed in the media, engulfed by it and consequently overpowered and overwhelmed by its excessive omni-present constraints*.

Baudrillard's claims follow, assuredly, Walter Benjamin's examination of photography and film in his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and particularly Benjamin's exposé of art's plight in relationship to mechanical

reproduction. (Benjamin, *Illuminations*) As is well acknowledged, according to Benjamin, art lost its original *aura* and thus became obliged to relinquish its claims to exceptionality as a form of human endeavour capable of offering alternative (and ostensibly superior) experiences and models for better being. Benjamin brought into critical discourse an awareness that widespread integrated changes in technological conditions can affect the accumulated consciousness and trigger prevalent changes in cultural norms as he specifically analysed how photo-mechanical technology intervenes in delineating existence. He understood that through the mediation of machines, the inherent realm can be contorted and prejudiced, thus changing our awareness of it.

However in post-modern society, with its electronic and digital simulacra, there is no longer a spent nostalgia for natural semblance and Warholian reproducibility becomes the fundamental logic and code of the information society.

Although I agree with Baudrillard when he reiterates that (in general) most visual information is accepted by society rather passively, in my view, his way of conceiving of life as passive homogeneity is itself a form of totalist idealisation, however supposedly critical or negative its ubiquitous aggregates propound to be. This is evident in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* when Baudrillard writes, "...the whole environment becomes a signifier...". (Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, p. 186) Following on, he evinces the conquest of functionalisation and portrays post-modern society as one of "total control" and "total organisation" in which functionalised aesthetics are incorporated in the very cybernetic organisation of society. (Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, p. 186) All dichotomies between appearance and reality, surface and depth, life and art, collapse into a functionalised, integrated, and self-reproducing gesamt universe of passé simulacra models and codes.

In contrast, I wish to hypothesize and demonstrate here a counter-mannerist art of latent excess which re-establishes a critical distance which Baudrillard pessimistically claims no longer exists – but an ambiguous private critical distance: a distance achieved through the challenge of (and disparity between) pleasurable frustration. This is an art that demands

of society an active visualizing participation in private interpretations - and thus is a legitimate metaphor for contemporary art as a form of simulation-shattering engagement. But this is not an anti-Baudrillard art (well it is only if you take seriously his end-of-art implications, which I do not) but rather a post-Baudrillardian one, in that I accept his point that numerous people today dwell (but not totally) in the expanse of infotainment, with its potential instantaneous non-separability and ubiquity. But I want then to ask just what can art's contribution be to the enlargement of understanding of our conspicuously excessive Western society? I am certain that it need not be confined to what Baudrillard says its role is now; asserting the "insignificance" and "meaninglessness" of a society already null and void. (Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, p. 27) Yes, Baudrillard claims that art has no role to play (that art is irreverent) when he writes that the "artistic object in this system loses its status as an artistic sign, since this is now the role of all objects. The cynical smile of American Pop Art (Warhol) is one of the *obligatory signs* of consumption: it no longer indicates a humor, a critical distance ,," (Baudrillard, *Pop--An Art of Consumption*, p. 44).

So I will argue the contrary: that a post-pop art is indispensable to us by demonstrating below how an art of counter-mannerist latent excess (produced in the Baudrillardian milieu of image superabundance and information proliferation) is an art that can problematise the pop simulacra and hence enliven us to the privateness - and unique separateness - of the human condition in lieu of the fabulously constructed social spectacle which engulfs and (supposedly) controls us. This private separateness offers us a personal critical distance (gap), and thus another perspective on (and from) the given social simulacra.

Such an art of latent excess then may provide us with two essential aspects relevant to our lives. First, it can provide a private context in which to suitably understand our simulacra situation. Secondly (but more importantly) it may then undermine this understanding of the simulacra by overwhelming our immersion in the customary simulacra – along with our own prudent pose as observer and judge. Through the destructive-creative bacchanalia at the root of an art of latent excess we are prodded to lose our position of

detached observer as such an art demands our engaged intellectual and perceptual production.

For me at least then, post-pop art, when latently excessive in its own right, is capable of functioning, paradoxically, by nurturing in us a sense of polysemic uniqueness and of individuality brought about through a *counter-mannerist* style of reproducibility (ever more circuitous, excessive and *décadent*); a style which takes us from the state of the social to the state of the secret distinguishable I, by overloading ideological representation to a point where it becomes non-representational. It is this *non-representational counter-mannerist representation* which breaks us out of the fascination and complicity with pop art and the mass media mode of communication. Thus the *repartie* to Baudrillard's view of media-bathed society is an aesthetic *élan* constituted through private superabundance.

Perhaps it is relevant here to remember that *Mannerism* (generally the art of the period of Late-Renaissance circa 1530-1600) was an aesthetic movement that valued highly refined gracefulness and elegance; a beautiful *maniera* (style) from which Mannerism takes its name. The term usually means an art in which lavish attention is paid to stylisation and to the superficialities of semblance. This is obviously a very Baudrillardian state.

An example of the counter-mannerist style from the period is the *Grotesque*, which is deliberately anti-actual, often including elaborate depictions of multiple figures bound in tendrils. The *Grotesque* (in Italian *Grottesco*) became an arabesque style of all-over decoration based on a linked mêlée of fantastic, diminutive figures deriving from Roman mural and vault decoration which had been unearthed during the Renaissance (such as at the Golden House of Nero); mural decorations which themselves suggested ancient expressions of religio-sexual inter-penetrability. This fanciful imagery involved mixing animal, human, and plant forms together. First revived in the Renaissance by the school of Raphaël Sanzio (1483-1520) in Rome, the Grotesque quickly came into fashion in 16th-century Italy and subsequently became popular throughout Europe.



typical anonymous 16th century Grotesque design

Interior decorators at the time esteemed the style inasmuch as it was suitably hoary in derivation, whimsical and playfully erotic, and, most importantly capable, due to its all-over field approach, of fitting any required expanse because it had no solitary subject-matter and hence *no central focus*.

Counter-mannerist style represented the reversal of mannerist rationality by introducing into the order of the simulation an art dedicated to the irrational realm of the de-simulated orb in which rationalist rules need not apply. It uses the excessive all-over field typical of the classic work of Jackson Pollock (1912-1956).



Jackson Pollock painting

An Art of Latent Excess

So what is an art of latent excess? It is an art that puts forth an aesthetic élan of superabundance which reconceptualises art in terms of simulation so as to grant art an unbridled zone – free of the good manners of simple simulations. However, this character of de-simulated openness, which an inception of the art of latent excess assumes, demands that we seek a liberation from custom, doctrine and influence, and that we grasp again the autonomy and priority of art as a special type of excessive ideological activity.

The acknowledged probing at the outer limits of recognisable representation, the excited all-over fullness and fervour of this syncretistic probe, isn't a failing of communications within excessive terms then; *it is its subject*. Such a copious realisation is insinuated through overloaded/excessive stimulus inasmuch as latent excess can represent every integrated meaning conceivable, for in the art of excess the focal point is never circumscribed. The fusion of elements within latent excess are not, by definition, passively received and accepted. By nature of its conflicting excessive presentation, information is to some degree psychologically embedded and thus withheld even as it is inexorably displayed all at once

to the limited nature of our human perceptive competence. Thus an art of latent excess takes us away from the habitual focus of the picturesque and potentially liberates us inwardly from the infringements stemming from the deluge of mass-media images - and so stimulates us to assess anew the calibre of any such infringement. Now we must interrogate the validity of our sense of simple simulations with their frequent binary image oppositions. Hence it is in the amity felt with the excessive ground that we may feel a sensuous liberation from ideological monotony and cultural prudery.

A perfect example of the art of latent excess was created by the anonymous collective of skilled artists in the *Abside* (Apse) of the Grotte de Lascaux. The Apse is a roundish, semi-spherical, penumbra-like chamber (like those adjacent to romanesque basiliques) approximately 4.5 metres in diameter (about 5 yards) covered on every wall surface (including the ceiling) with thousands of entangled, overlapping, engraved drawings (Leroi-Gourhan, *The Art of Prehistoric Man in Western Europe*, p. 315) for which, on request, I received a very unique privilege of seeing, though far too briefly.

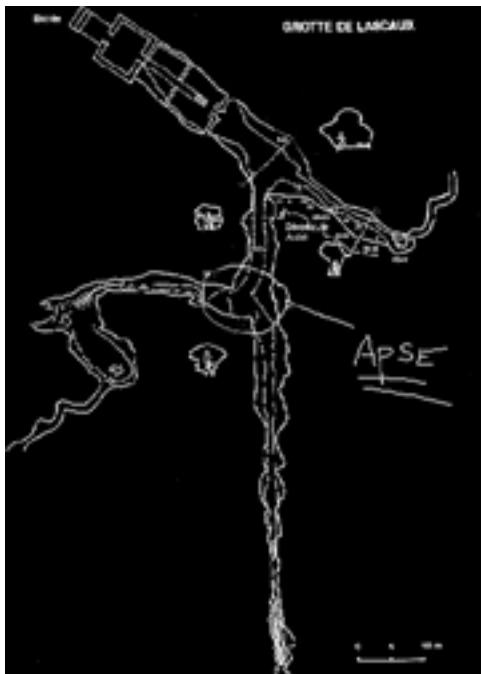
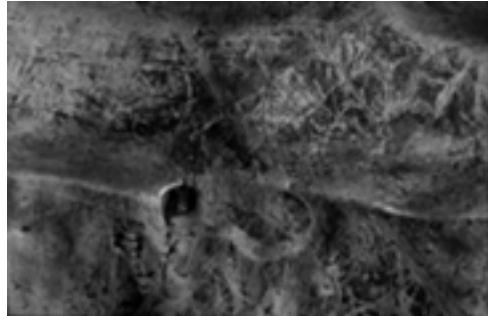


diagram of Lascaux



detail from the *Abside*

The ceiling of the Apse of Lascaux (which ranges from 1.6 up to 2.7 metres high (about 5.2 to 8.9 feet) as measured from the original floor height) is so completely and richly bedecked with such engravings that it indicates that the prehistoric people who executed them first constructed a scaffold to do so. (Ruspoli, *The Cave of Lascaux: The Final Photographic Record*, pp. 146-147) This indicates to me that the Apse was an important and sacred part of the cave and indeed Ruspoli calls it the "strongest, most richly symbolic, most mysterious and most sacred" of all the inner spaces which make up Lascaux. (Ruspoli, *The Cave of Lascaux: The Final Photographic Record*, p. 146)

Generally the Apse however has been ignored by art theoreticians (and there is only one widely published scholarly investigation of it per se, by Denis Vialou in Arlette Leroi-Gourhan's *Lascaux Inconnu* even though Abbé Glory spent several years trying to decipher this inextricable chamber) as nowhere is the eye permitted to linger over any detail (even though it holds an immense 2.5 metre engraving (8.2 foot) in its midst). Rather, the gaze is urged on by an all-inclusive flood of taunting sublimated optic information in need of visual stamina. Nevertheless, the Apse holds a semi-legible "comprehensive index" of all of the forms of representation found scattered throughout the entire cave, thus making up what Mario Ruspoli calls Lascaux's seductive "véritable corpus" (real body). (Ruspoli, *The Cave of Lascaux: The Final Photographic Record*, p. 147)

Of it the libertine writer, paleologist, archivist, and radical thinker Georges Bataille (1897-1962) said that it was one of the most remarkable chambers in the cave but that one is ultimately disappointed by it. (Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes: Lascaux: La Naissance de l'Art*, p.

58-59)) I was not disappointed however. Indeed, what pleased and fascinated me about the Apse was exactly its cryptic and foreboding over-all hyper-totalising iconographic character granted by its boundless, palimpsestesque, wall-paper-like image explosion (what Bataille called its *fouillis*) of overlapping near non-photo-reproducible stockpiled drawings from which, when sustained visual attention is maintained, unexpected configurations visually emerge. Here animals are superimposed in chaotic discourse, some fully and carefully rendered, others unfulfilled and left open to penetration by the environment, all commingled with an "extraordinary confused jumble" (Leroi-Gourhan, *The Art of Prehistoric Man in Western Europe*, p. 315) of lines including, remarkably, the sole claviform sign in the Périgord and, even more remarkably, Lascaux's only reindeer, an animal which existed in plenitude during the period of the adornment of Lascaux. Its extensive use of superimposed multiple-operative optic perception (*optic perception* unifies objects in a spatial continuum) presents the viewer with no single point of reference, no orientation, no top, no bottom, no left, no right, and no separate parts to its whole. Rather it offers a general, unified visual effect typical of what is called *sfumato* composition; a smoky technique used for decreasing the separating dramatic force and physical presence of isolated figures in a work of art by immersing them in a fume, semi-imperturbable pose. Sfumato is the seductive, subtle, smoothly imperceptible, gradation of dark colors which approaches a smoggy unity useful in the creation of psychological atmospheric effects. Through sfumato, complimentary contrasts (*contrapposto*) find a unity previously absent and it is this unity that lends latent excess visualization its most significant self-alternative to hegemonic simulation. This is so as sfumato invites and promotes an expanded, diaphanous, dilated focus achieved as a matter of personal intuition and hence is removed from direct rational knowledge and technical manoeuvres. With sfumato we see the seeds of a visual counter-tradition in opposition to the crisp, detached, geometricised optics of clean simulation. This oppositional optic practice of sfumato visualisation, which brings receptive vision to a state of sympathetic languor, was taught by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519) to his students in his *Treatise on Painting* - where he encouraged languid attention to the ambiguous grubbiness of cracks and smudges on decrepit walls which may suggest faces and forms to the viewer in order to aid artistic imaginative and visionary ability. Thus sfumato (latent) effects offer another

type of management of vision and is an important element in the definition of latent excess.

I believe this vision corresponds to what Baudrillard speaks of as a “recovering of radical illusion” where we liberate ourselves from the attachment to images by paying attention to the “secret” way images are linked and bound together. (Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, p. 127). Of this connectivity Baudrillard says, “art has to enter into the intimacy of this process”. (Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, p. 127).

As a result of the seductive sfumato excess encountered in the Apse, I had the peculiar feeling of being flooded over by a cloud-like image cesspool of deep meanings which I could not uncode. It was as if I was in the midst of a model of the Bohm/Pribram universe as implicate pattern zapping dada. As such it seemed an imposition onto Paleolithic culture of the very thing that should unstabilise it: nihilism. Nihilism in that it is no longer a matter of heterogeneous figuration, but of scanning a homospatial criss-crossing and oscillating battle scene between interwoven figures, immersed in their ideational ground with which they have merged in a deliberate process of constitutional defigurisation. There is no longer any space outside of the figures to define them, and hence, in a mental reversal, space is immersed in the overlapping figures. The nihilistic cancellation at work here then seemed to be an attempt to deny the validity of subject/object understanding and to deny that any visual erudition of anything whatsoever is possible, in the interests of omnijective introspection. Here flesh itself is sensed as *viractual* (*): dancing on a clock.

Bataille said that what was curious about the Apse was that the artists abandoned their oeuvre to the next to come after them in an ant-like activity, yet they did not engrave their figures with less conviction or care. (Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes: Lascaux: La Naissance de l'Art*, p. 59) Obviously the artists here did not work from a life model but from the overlapping introspective depths of their visual memories. Indeed likewise, the Apse seems to call upon the viewer to construct a mnemonic psychological interpretation of it based on its tightly woven, intricate abundance, i.e., its latent excess. But even after

introspectively synthesising the overlapping imploded individual parts into a mnemonic coherent whole, the Apse retained for me a provocative discord and irritation which tantalised my mind farther towards a withheld (perhaps forgotten) seemingly encoded signification. But as our subconscious is energised by sustained desire that which I sensed to be both obscure and overabundant about the Apse merged into a hybrid interpretation which combined conflicting ideas about abundance and nihilism into an égréore complex chunk of de-simulated information which I then viewed as a single meta-nihilistic mega-symbol. This experience, I propose, reflects and confirms what Baudrillard, I suspect, really feels about the potentiality of art when he says: “In art – and this applies to contemporary art as well as classical art – there is a dual postulate, and therefore a dual strategy. An impulse to annihilate, to erase all traces of the world and reality, and the contrary resistance to that impulse.” (Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, p. 118)

With this meta-nihilistic mega-symbol's boundlessness, the Apse appeared to me as the most sacred of the cave's sacred places. Certainly easy conceptions of one beautiful being as distinguished from another (in specificity) are denied and an aberrant invalidation takes place where previous concepts of the finite and the infinite implode (as do concepts of the voluminous and the vacuous) into a unified field of multiple-reproductive disembodied existences. Here, laid out before my eyes, was what Baudrillard calls the problem of materializing a “nothingness at the limits of nothingness” - a place to “trace the edge of emptiness at the limits of emptiness, to trace the filigree of emptiness”. (Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, p. 115)

This then is a sacred/sexual place of singular iconoclastic intrascoping and distant transformation (by reason of its creative virtuality and anticipated self-cancellation) as its beautiful representational anti-depictions are neither here nor there but overlap. Clearly what I am saying about the Apse runs counter to the heart of positivism, a paradigm under which we continue to toil unconsciously, as the positivist ideal is a search for rational, systematic thought where images can be broken down, explored, understood, and explained. Here in the Apse we seem to have encountered an irrational systematicism that seems to critique reason, a systematic critique that predates (and in some places

overlaps) the modern positivist attitude towards sensation. Here we are inside of a homospatial site of overrunning flux and of hybridisation; a place for the rejection of realism and its values (or at least a place to save oneself from the futile and finally unreasonable claims of dogmatic simulation and rationalism). The Apse then represents a thrusting off of optic and mental boundaries and thus is a complex mirroring of our own fleeting impressions which constitute the movement of our consciousness; the perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves. Here we are not static, and we have no use for reductive concepts of simulation, but we are inside a de-simulating space that carries its own nihilistic opposite within itself.

Particularly dense with overlapping imagery is the part of the Apse called the *Absidiole*, a small, niche-like hollow (like the semi-spherical small niches which house holy relics attached to the apse in romanesque basiliques) just in front of the drop into the Pit. Here one can ostensibly participate in a play of self-tutorial multiple-immersions into latent excess as one stands in the Absidiole inside of the Apse which is located inside the groin of the cave itself and introspectively view through sublimated excess an explication of the curved inner-logic of de-simulation itself: *encased and withheld excess*. Assuredly vision here is no longer the controlling power over animals in nature (or signs of them), but on the contrary, vision itself is engulfed in what Baudrillard calls a return “to the womb of the appearance of things where they merely state their presence, albeit in multiple forms, multiplied by the specter of metamorphoses”. (Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, p. 128)

The motivational force which quickens the Apse then seems to be a desire to undermine perpetual vision and replace it with another type of impregnable and latent vision, or at least to suggest that there may be other types of vision possible. Its nihilistic excess serves the positive function of questioning the validity of the customary appearance of things and to make connective understanding inextricably felt.

Indeed the basic function of the visual turbulence of the Apse, from the connective perspective, is to precisely shake our conviction that our visual thinking is sound and to hold any such assured convictions, rather, in suspension. Hence it is only routine that

formal issues (where consciousness may be said to be self-referential and self-sufficient) would arise over any humanist narrative ethic, as the Apse is more concerned with a recycling of psychological energy than with optically correct (in Virilio's terms) astuteness. Hence, freed from representational obligations, dark chaotic powers of consciousness are unleashed via the Apse's repressed excessive exuberance.

In the Apse the level of evasive mono-complexity of the fouillis (given the uniform sfumato tonality in which the one sombre value dominates the complex visual arena) also challenges preconceptions of legibility based on our ability to identify and locate figures in their ground, and this made me wonder if the visualisation chamber I was in was not perhaps a training spot for the hunters to improve their discerning vision, so as to aid them in visually discovering animals from within their tangled natural camouflage. But also on scanning the systematic, intricate and perplexing inert spread of the Apse, one cannot but sense that in some way one is looking at a representation of the metaphysics of orgasm and death, and that by absorbing its visual code one was looking sex/death in the face. To be, or not to be: that is the paradigmatic choice when visualising form into and out of existence when examining the elusive alternatives made manifest here. Being, beings, or nothingness: all are tentative conditions of resolution (or forestalled resolution) here; all spout their own ontological/neurological preferences.

In this purging atmosphere of imploded meta-nihilistic sacrilege, spontaneous reflexes only go so far and reflection necessarily takes over in search of an expansive meaning. Yes, nihilistic amanuensis and jubilant Baudrillard catastrophic implosion are here, not only in how this staggering image-dump can be read, but also in terms of how its creation entailed the task of disrespecting the care with which marks achieve representational artistry in an apparent desire to achieve and contemplate radical negation. This scouring of assertive vision must have been deemed necessary only precisely here, as in the other galleries, very often, superimposed images respected the marks previous laid down and sensitively incorporated them into the ensuing hybrid super-impositional compositions. By ransacking representational vision so, the Apse paradoxically partakes in the category typical of major art (regardless of its marginal standing within the cave and within

Prehistory) as it seemingly rejects the figurative tradition in order to reinvent it as entrancing meta-(or supra)-representation. Thus it is major in the way that John Cage's musical composition/non-composition *4'33"* is in forcing us to astutely consider silence as sound. And as such it is a meditation on fullness and emptiness: on the emptiness of fullness and the fullness of emptiness. And this is its key latent/excessive exemplary value.

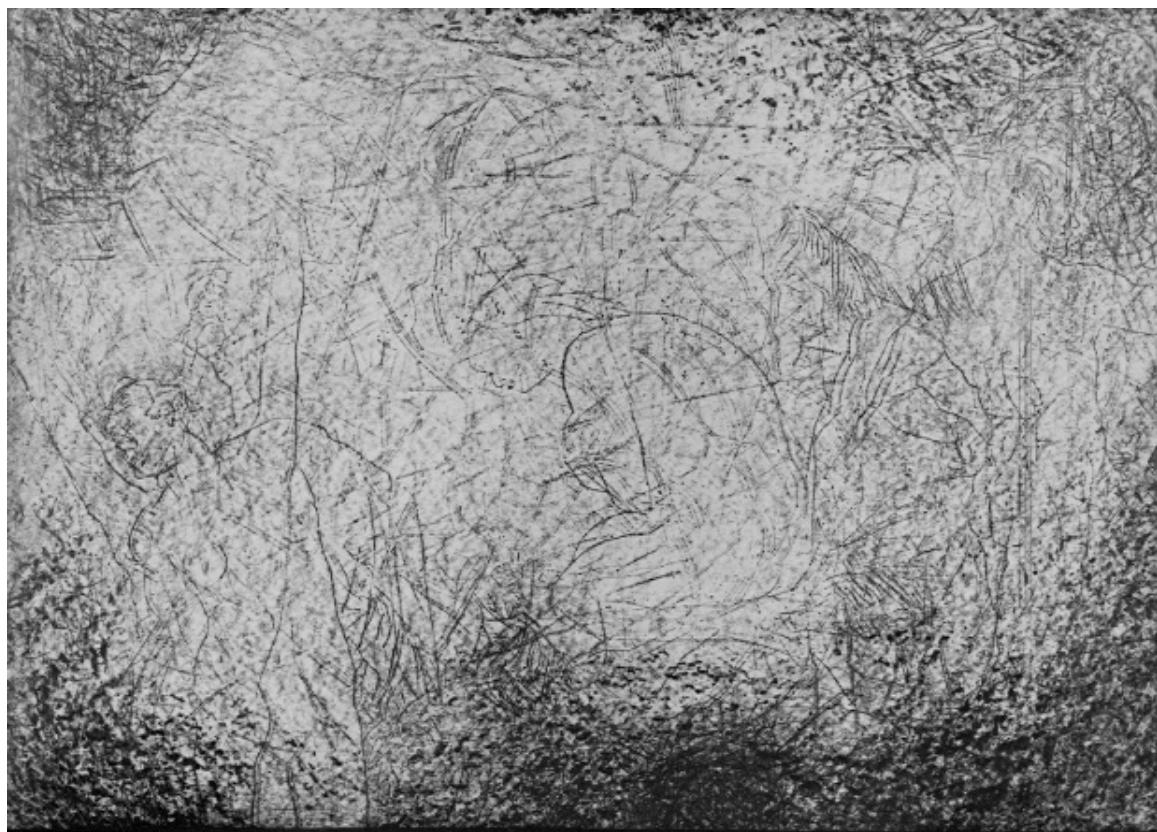
Archaeologists are continuously undertaking to understand the marks left here from this inaccessible epoch as they analyse its dishevelled iconography in hopes of ascertaining why this tangled impulse was consummated. Most do not see however that the Apse defies the common assumption that visual art is associative, that it is based on the human mental capability to make one thing stand for and symbolise another, in agreement with society. The usual assumption is that art-marks on a surface denote content, not just to the mark-maker but to others as well. All we know for sure about the abstract constitution of the Apse is that its dynamic cluster of representational/anti-representational operations (and the meta-nihilistic/mega-symbol boundlessness which it contains in its kitty) were reworked over the span of many centuries. However by no means do all of the superimposed figures date from different times, thus their overlapping is not a simplistic function of time nor is it for lack of space. Thus its abstract intentionality assumes a certain degree of lucidity.

If the Apse functioned as a mnemonic devise, or as a site of hegemonious non-being severed from any practical purpose, we shall never know. But it is my hypothesis that the Apse chamber functioned as a cognitive dissonance visualisation field and defocal virtualising area which adjusted-up the expanding and dilating eye/mind to the awareness of conflicting, non-rational and de-simulatory realities involving sex and death through the use of deeply creative virtual visualizations. This is a creation of critical detachment by staring collapsed distance down - and the essence of what I have been calling an art of latent excess.

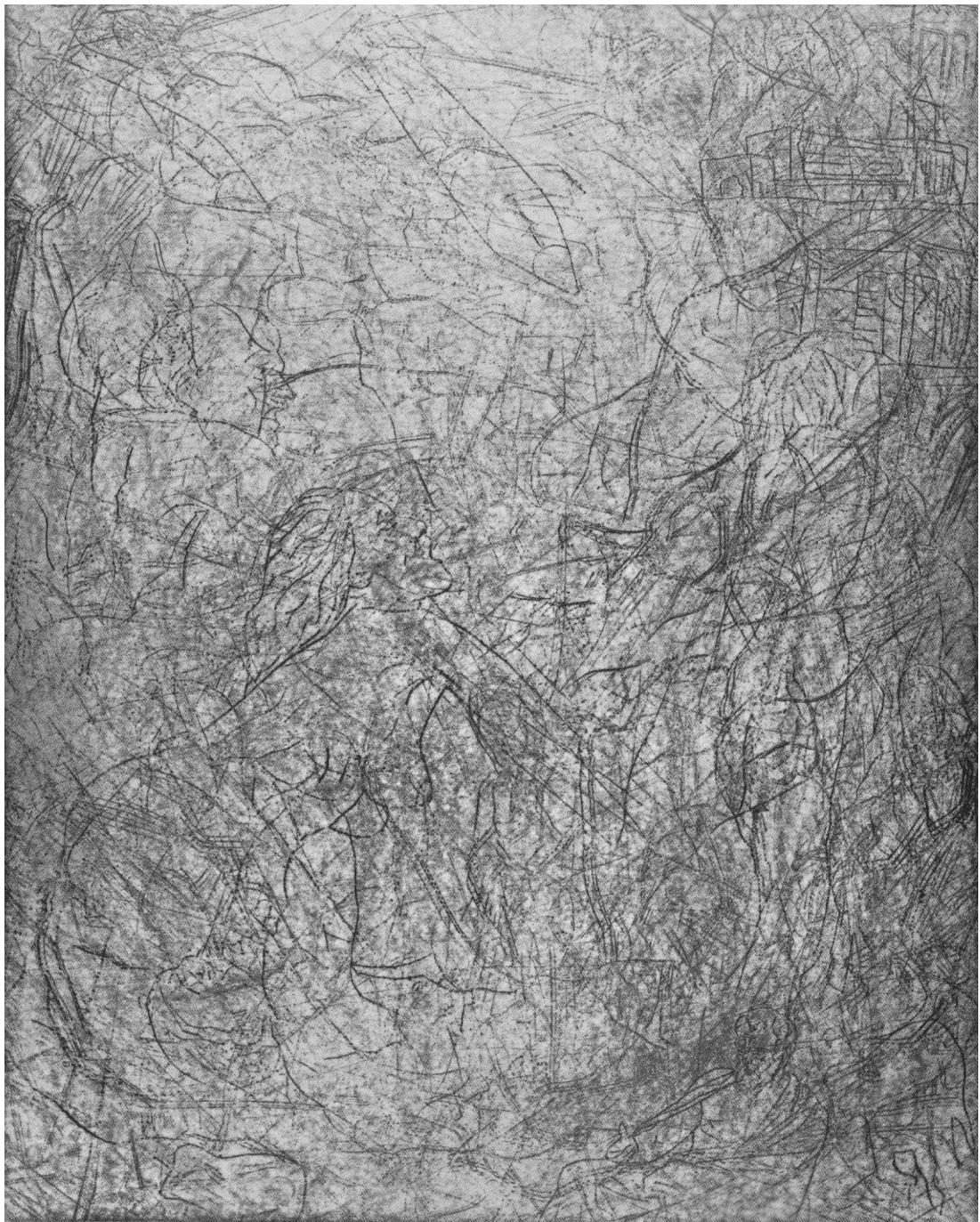
This personal explanation for the dark excess of the Apse cannot be proven, nor, I think, disproven and thus it remains a moot point, however fascinating. Though obviously

imbued with meaning, we unfortunately are unlikely ever to know the true meaning or function of the image-space of the Apse (or the other marks of the Magdalenian people for that matter). What I know though, with certainty, is how the latent amplitude of the Apse operated on me, and what it did was to collapse the inherited meaning of human image making into a more inclusive and available sense of excessive ebullition and into a dynamic feeling of wanton sexual climax. The shrouded scatter stirred my desire to seemingly unfold and deliver forth a sanctioned libidinous pathos where forms of salacious creative ferment and levels of self-indulgence are concurrent. From this state of floridity it might be possible to further define latent excessive states of art consciousness as those which contain a condition in which reality is perceived as consisting of more than that which everyday vision brings to light. Such aesthetic states bypass discursive counterintuitive processes and confer a greater scope to the Baudrillardian vision.

What additionally fascinates is that this fine jumble of delicate lines, some beautifully representational and others again not, corresponded to the prolonged series of greyish drawing with which I began my carrier as an artist some twenty years ago: drawings which had partially been conceived of as a shadow of our nervous system's meshed neural signals mingling with nuclear catastrophe.



Joseph Nechvatal *Black Spring* 1984 graphite on paper 11x14"



Joseph Nechvatal *Gods of Politics* 1984 graphite on paper 14x11””

So we see that by staring a collapse of signs and the destruction of distinctions in the eye (so to speak), banal depictions of Baudrillardian ideological content are flawed. Flawed for they close the spectator and the creator off into ascertainable parcels of restricted

implications which preclude the concept of freedom of imagination. To get this feeling in an art of latent excess there must be a subliminal infinity about the visual-conceptual field, an overloaded incompleteness which lures us to the inspiration of individual sovereignty; the idea of our own unclear and denuded realm.

An art of latent excess refutes then the accustomed Baudrillardian platitudes of non-judgmentality along with its claims for the impossibility of critical distance. It is my contention that it is in this inventive condition of privately excessive formlessness that we can ascertain the delimitation of Baudrillardian mass-pop media ideology and the resultant implications of that cognizance. Here then, in singular but active impulsive privacy, is the distance Baudrillard claims no longer exists for critique.

Such a self-referential private interpretive activity overwhelms illusionist trompe-l'oeil seduction with a fresh formalism (formalism rigorously stresses attention to formalional principles) thereby exceeding and soiling simulation's transparency - spoiling its presentation of an illusionistic faux world as real. In this sense it confirms what Baudrillard claims art is about, however: an “inventing another scene; inventing something other than reality. (...) The purpose of art is to invent a whole other scene.” (Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, p. 77)

Such an art of private latent excess never offers us conventions then. Rather such an art is like an amorphous fertile seedbed that undermines the hitherto clear distinctions falsely made between simulacra and the imagination by way of simultaneously negating and spontaneously recombining. Here semblance and space are always already connected within a dark and obscure excessive orb of visual noise as the art of latent excess negates representations (and all they imply) - thereby affirming a consciously divergent and spontaneous way to see and judge. Here is what I believe Baudrillard calls the “blind spot of singularity” – the spot where form appears and simultaneously falls apart. (Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art*, p. 71)

An art of latent excess stands then in defiance of the limits of ordinary perception and representational simulacra. Thus it is (or can be) about the opposition between the daily work-day and the transgressive/ecstatic moment. In a sense it attempts to set up a stable form of ecstatic transgression where one can go back and forth at will via dissimulation.

I should say that most all of my ideas on this subject stemmed from the reading of Georges Bataille's book *Visions of Excess* (which appeared in English translation in 1985) after which I began to experiment with (and analysis through my artwork) various artistic approaches towards latent excess. In the terms Bataille proposes, any restricted economy, any sealed arrangement (such as an image, an identity, a concept, or a simulation) produces more than it can account for, hence it will inevitably be fractured by its own unacknowledged excess, and in seeking to maintain itself, will, against its own rationalised logic, crave rupture, expenditure, and loss.

Joseph Nechvatal

www.nechvatal.net

(*) The viractual is my own term for the merging of the virtual with the corporeal (the actual).

Resources:

- Baudrillard, J. 1988. *Selected Writings*. Cambridge: Polity Press
Baudrillard, J. 1997. *Ecran Total*. Paris: Galilée
Baudrillard, J. 1987. *The Ecstasy of Communication*. New York: Semiotext(e)
Baudrillard, J. 1983. *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e)
Baudrillard, J. 1983. *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*. New York: Semiotext(e)
Baudrillard, J. 1981. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. St. Louis: Telos
Baudrillard, J. 1975. *The Mirror of Production*. St. Louis: Telos Press
Baudrillard, J. 1993. *The Transparency of Evil*. New York: Verso
Baudrillard, J. 1984. *The Evil Demon of Images*. Annandale, Australia: Power Institute
Baudrillard, J. 1988. *Fatal Strategies*. New York: Semiotext(e)
Baudrillard, J. 1989. "Pop--An Art of Consumption", Paul Taylor, ed., *Post-Pop Art*, Cambridge: MIT
Baudrillard, J. 2003. *Cool Memories IV*, Verso
Baudrillard, J. 2002. *The Perfect Crime*. Verso
Baudrillard, J. 2005. *The Conspiracy of Art*. New York: Semiotext(e)
Vialou, D. 1979. "Les Gravures du Passage et de l'Abside" In Leroi-Gourhan, Arlette. ed. 1979. *Lascaux Inconnu*. Paris: C.N.R.S.

- Ruspoli, M. 1987. *The Cave of Lascaux: The Final Photographic Record*. New York: Abrams
- Leroi-Gourhan, André. 1968. *The Art of Prehistoric Man in Western Europe*. London: Thames and Hudson
- Benjamin, W. 1978. *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, New York: Schocken
- Benjamin W. 1968. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World
- Cage, J. 1966. *Silence*. London: Calder and Boyers
- Bataille, G. 1955. *Lascaux: La Naissance de l'Art*. Geneva: Skira
- Bataille, G. 1979. *Oeuvres Complètes: Lascaux: La Naissance de l'Art*. Paris: Gallimard
- Bataille, G. 1985. *Visions of Excess*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Nechvatal, J. 1990a. *Selected Writings*. Paris: Editions Antoine Candau
- Nechvatal, J. 1991a. *An Ecstasy of Excess*. Mönchengladbach: Juni-Verlag
- Nechvatal, J. and Gagneur, D. eds. 1992. *Excess in the Techno-mediocratic Society*. Arbois: Musée d'Arbois
- Nechvatal, J. 1987a. "High Style" In *Arts Magazine*, April Issue 1987
- Nechvatal, J. 1987b. "Post-Simulation Decadence" In *Arts Magazine*, Summer Issue, 1987
- Nechvatal, J. 1990. "Hyper-death and the Scopic Corpse. In *Artforum*, November Issue, 1990, p. 130
- Nechvatal, J. 1990a. "The Urge for Image and the Saturated Eye" on the *Public Domain Web Site Perforations*: <http://www.pd.org>
- Nechvatal, J. 1991a. "An Ecstasy of Excess" In Nechvatal, J. 1991. *An Ecstasy of Excess*. Mönchengladbach: Juni-Verlag, pp. 3-7
- Nechvatal, J. 1991c. "The Collapse of the 80's Image" In *M/E/A/N/I/N/G Contemporary Art Issues*, May
- Nechvatal, J. 1992. "Outrances dans la Societe Techno-mediocratic" In Nechvatal, J. and Gagneur, D. 1992. *Excess in the Techno-mediocratic Society*. Arbois: Musée d'Arbois, p. 1
- Nechvatal, J. 1993. "The Art of Excess in the Techno-mediocratic Society" *New Observations*, No. 94
- Nechvatal, J. 1994. "New Territory of Significance" In *New Observations*, No. 104